

# AYÍKÁ

ISSN: 2664-3030 (Print)  
2664-3022 (Online)

**JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENT AND  
POLITICS IN AFRICA**

AYIKA: JOURNAL OF ENVIRONMENT AND POLITICS IN AFRICA

## **Editorial Note**

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.69778/2664-3022/2026/8.1/EN>

This issue of *AYIKA* brings together a rich and timely collection of scholarship that underscores a central truth: in Africa, environmental questions are deeply political, and political realities are increasingly shaped by environmental change. The contributions in this volume reflect the growing complexity of this relationship, engaging themes that span governance, technology, security, sustainability, and identity across diverse African contexts and beyond.

A defining feature of this issue is its strong engagement with the role of digitalisation in advancing sustainability. From the systematic review on how digitalisation enables decarbonisation, to analyses of agri-tech adoption in Nigeria and South Africa, the volume highlights the transformative potential of technology in addressing environmental challenges. These contributions move beyond optimism, carefully examining the mechanisms and constraints that shape technological uptake. They remind us that digital solutions are not neutral; their effectiveness depends on policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions.

Equally prominent is the question of governance, particularly in relation to service delivery and institutional performance. The examination of water service failures in Gauteng Province offers a sobering account of how governance lapses can translate into environmental and public health crises. Similarly, the discussions on public service reform and parliamentary oversight reveal the persistent challenges of accountability and administrative effectiveness across the continent. Together, these studies point to a critical insight: sustainable environmental outcomes are contingent on capable, transparent, and responsive institutions.

The issue also engages deeply with questions of political order, security, and regional cooperation. Analyses of Zimbabwe's political history, hybrid regimes in Central Africa, and border conflicts involving Nigeria reveal how political instability and governance structures shape environmental management and development trajectories. The exploration of indivisible security within the SADC region further highlights the interconnectedness of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. These contributions reinforce the idea that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from broader political and security dynamics.

Another important strand in this volume is the emphasis on economic strategies and livelihoods, particularly in rural contexts. Articles on organic agribusiness, marketing strategies aligned with climate action, and the challenges faced by women in agribusiness illuminate the everyday realities of sustainability. They foreground the experiences of local actors, especially women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and innovation are often overlooked. By examining the socio-economic factors shaping revenue growth and participation, these studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of development.

The volume also makes a significant intellectual contribution by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. The exploration of

Ubuntu as a framework for regional governance offers a human-centred perspective that challenges dominant policy paradigms. Similarly, the critique of epistemic violence in transboundary conservation highlights the marginalisation of local knowledge and agency. These interventions are particularly important in rethinking whose knowledge counts in environmental governance and how more equitable frameworks can be developed. Urban spaces and cultural expressions are not left out of this conversation. Contributions on city branding in Harare and the intersection of art, space, and identity in Durban demonstrate how environmental and political dynamics are experienced and expressed in urban contexts. These studies expand the scope of environmental politics by incorporating cultural and spatial dimensions, offering fresh insights into how cities in the Global South are responding to climate change.

Notably, this issue also extends its analytical reach beyond Africa, with a study on urban climate initiatives in Brazil and a comparative examination of socio-economic vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. These contributions enrich the volume by situating African experiences within a broader global context, encouraging cross-regional learning and dialogue.

Finally, the inclusion of research on language and education, such as the study on tense substitution errors among Tshivenda-speaking students, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of knowledge production, communication, and development. It highlights the importance of education in shaping the capacity to engage with complex environmental and political issues.

Taken together, the articles in this issue reflect a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They challenge simplistic narratives and instead offer nuanced analyses that recognise the interconnected nature of environment and politics in Africa. As the continent continues to navigate the pressures of climate change, population growth, and political transformation, the insights presented here are both timely and necessary. This volume invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think more critically and act more collaboratively. It is our hope that the conversations sparked within these pages will contribute to more just, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to environmental governance in Africa and beyond.

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## SOLDIERED DEMOCRACY AND PEACE: THE SMITHAN SYNDROME OF POLITICS AND ADMINISTRATION IN ZIMBABWE, 1965–2018

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines the evolution of Zimbabwe's democratic experience from the Unilateral Declaration of Independence in 1965 to the post-Mugabe political order in 2018, focusing on the emergence of soldiered democracy. Soldiered democracy refers to a political system in which democratic institutions formally exist but operate within a framework heavily influenced by military actors, coercive institutions, and liberation-war political culture. Using historical and analytical methods, the study traces the roots of this phenomenon to the colonial regime of Ian Smith, where constitutional engineering, security institutions, and racialised governance structures were deployed to entrench minority rule. These structures, rather than being dismantled after independence, were largely reproduced under the post-colonial leadership of Robert Mugabe and subsequently under Emmerson Mnangagwa. The paper introduces the Smithan Syndrome to describe the persistent fusion of political authority and coercive power shaping Zimbabwe's electoral politics and governance practices. Evidence from electoral events—particularly the 2008 and 2018 elections—demonstrates how military presence, political intimidation, and centralised executive authority have constrained democratic consolidation. The study argues that Zimbabwe's democratic trajectory reflects the enduring legacy of militarised politics inherited from colonial rule and reinforced during the liberation struggle, with significant implications for civil–military relations, democratic governance, and political stability in Zimbabwe and across Africa.*

**Keywords:** Soldiered democracy, Smithan Syndrome, civil–military relations, electoral politics, Zimbabwean governance

## Introduction

Zimbabwe, from time immemorial, has been bedevilled by a chequered democratic process. The roots of the contemporary crisis in its democratic development can be traced to the colonial era, when the foundations of governance were structured along racial exclusion and political domination. Because the country was a white settler colony, Chikwanha-Dzenga et al. (2004) noted that “before its political independence after a bitter and bloody armed liberation struggle, the country never knew democracy except in its limited and exclusivist sense.” That limited sense of democracy was largely confined to the traditional political structures that existed prior to the consolidation of colonial rule. However, the rise of white settlers fundamentally altered the political landscape by creating a sharp settler–non-settler political dichotomy that effectively excluded the African majority from meaningful political participation (Chikwanha-Dzenga et al., 2004).

Masipula Sithole earlier described the democratic process of Zimbabwe during this period as an *intra-white democracy*: democracy as rule of the whites, by the whites and for the whites (Chikwanha-Dzenga et al., 2004). Political participation and representation were therefore restricted to the settler minority, while Africans were systematically marginalised within the colonial administrative and political framework. This exclusionary political order was maintained through coercive state apparatuses that relied heavily on security forces to suppress African political mobilisation and

demands for self-governance. Consequently, the culture of governance that emerged during the colonial period was one in which political authority was closely intertwined with military power and coercion. The militarisation of political processes during the liberation struggle further entrenched the role of armed actors in political contestation, thereby shaping the character of Zimbabwe’s post-independence political environment.

Even the landmark 1980 election, which ushered Zimbabwe into political independence and appeared to take a national outlook, was in many ways only a shadow of an ideal democratic transition. Meredith (2015, p. 326) noted that “the election campaign was fought with ferocious intent on all sides as the British officials who spearheaded it judged all three main parties guilty of using intimidation and violence.” Soldiers, militia groups, and various paramilitary forces were deployed to intimidate voters either to vote in a particular direction or to abstain entirely. Political parties also faced severe restrictions regarding the number of places in which they could safely campaign due to the pervasive fear of harassment and physical assault. Rather than marking a decisive break from colonial authoritarian political practices, the 1980 election revealed the persistence of coercive strategies in electoral competition.

This pattern of militarised politics continued to shape Zimbabwe’s democratic experience in subsequent decades, extending into the elections held in 2018. The continued deployment of security forces, militias, and political intimidation in electoral

processes has significantly undermined democratic consolidation and threatened national peace and stability. What began as a colonial strategy of political control gradually evolved into a normalised practice within the post-colonial state, thereby embedding violence and militarisation within the democratic process itself. This study therefore argues that the militarisation of Zimbabwe's political and administrative systems—rooted in colonial settler governance and reinforced during the liberation struggle—produced what may be described as the Smithan Syndrome, a condition in which military influence over political authority persists within democratic structures, shaping electoral behaviour, governance practices, and the broader prospects for sustainable peace in Zimbabwe.

### **Political History of Zimbabwe**

Zimbabwe, formerly known as Rhodesia, is a landlocked country straddling the high plateau between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers in Southern Africa. It is bordered by South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, and Mozambique (Africa Year Book and Who's Who, 1977, p. 706). It has an ancient history that dates back to about 300 AD when, according to archaeologists, the first settlements—believed to be the ancestors of the Shona people—were being established between the Zambezi and Limpopo Rivers. These settlements later developed into notable political and economic centres, with the site that became Great Zimbabwe forming a major nucleus of power and trade (Zimbabwe, n.d.). The area flourished over time as commerce expanded and other groups settled in the region.

However, the historical evolution of political authority in the region later underwent profound transformations following contact with external powers. Around 1510, the first recorded contact occurred between the Shona people and the Portuguese traveller Antonio Fernandez, who visited Mwanamutapa Chikuyo's kingdom (Africa Year Book and Who's Who, 1977, p. 706). This encounter laid the foundation for the inland penetration of Portuguese traders and the subsequent external influence over trading activities within the area. Although these interactions were initially commercial, they gradually introduced new dynamics of political competition and foreign intervention that later shaped governance structures in the region.

By the dawn of the nineteenth century, the tsunamic wave of Shaka's expansionist campaigns had spread across much of Southern Africa. This development triggered the mass movement of the Ndebele people into the territory presently known as Zimbabwe. The Ndebele subsequently became the second-largest indigenous population in the region and established their own political authority under strong centralised leadership. While these pre-colonial political formations maintained their own systems of governance and military organisation, they did not exhibit the form of militarised electoral politics that later emerged under colonial rule. It was with the consolidation of European imperial interests that the fusion between military power and political authority became institutionalised.

A major turning point occurred on 11 February 1888, when Chief Lobengula, the most powerful ruler in the region at

the time, entered into an agreement with the British missionary J. S. Moffat, who also served as the British resident in Bulawayo, the capital of Lobengula's kingdom (Africa Year Book and Who's Who, 1977, p. 707). Through this agreement, Lobengula undertook not to enter into any treaty with another power without the prior consent of the British High Commissioner in South Africa. This agreement was further consolidated when agents of the mining syndicate of John Cecil Rhodes arrived on 30 October 1888 to negotiate concessionary rights with the chief. Lobengula subsequently granted full control over metals and mineral resources within his kingdom in exchange for a monthly payment of one hundred pounds, as well as 1,000 Martini–Henry rifles and 100,000 rounds of ammunition (Africa Year Book and Who's Who, 1977, p. 708).

Upon reassessing the implications of the agreement, Lobengula realised that he had acted without a full understanding of its consequences. His later reflections captured the deceptive nature of imperial expansion. He lamented his manipulation in the following words:

Did you ever see a chameleon catch a fly? The chameleon gets behind the fly and remains motionless for some time, then he advances very slowly and gently, first putting forward one leg and then another. At last, when well within reach, he darts out his tongue and the fly disappears. England is the chameleon and I am the fly. (Ayandele, 1966, p. 139). His regret symbolised the broader pattern of colonial penetration in which diplomatic agreements were used as instruments of political domination.

Despite Lobengula's realisation of the implications of the agreement, British imperial expansion proceeded without delay. The British South Africa Company was quickly established to implement the terms of the concession. By 29 October 1889, the company had been granted authority to administer the territory presently known as Zimbabwe and to establish a police force to enforce its authority (Africa Year Book and Who's Who, 1977, p. 708). The establishment of this armed administrative apparatus marked an important stage in the evolution of what may be described as the militarisation of governance, where coercive institutions were deployed to sustain political control over indigenous populations.

The growing encroachment of the company into local political and economic life generated resentment among Lobengula and his subjects. As the company extended its authority into various aspects of governance and resource control, tensions escalated into armed confrontation. During the conflict that followed, Chief Lobengula died in January 1894, and the company consolidated its authority over the territory. On 3 May 1895, the company issued a proclamation naming the territory Matabeleland Rhodesia in honour of Cecil Rhodes (Africa Year Book and Who's Who, 1977, p. 708). The imposition of company rule institutionalised a governance structure that relied heavily on armed force and administrative coercion, thereby reinforcing the pattern of political authority sustained by military power.

Further constitutional developments occurred on 12 September 1923 when, following agitation by white settlers

and the referendum held the previous year, the British government proclaimed the territory Southern Rhodesia. Under this arrangement, the white minority assumed control over the administration of the country. The consolidation of minority rule created a political system in which the coercive power of the state was systematically deployed to maintain racial domination. This system reached a critical point under the leadership of Ian Smith, whose government was determined to preserve white minority rule. The 1969 constitution introduced by Smith was explicitly designed to be the “*death knell of the notion of majority rule [as it] would entrench government in the hands of civilised Rhodesians for all time*” (Meredith, 2015, p. 320).

Even when confronted with growing internal resistance and international pressure, Smith maintained his opposition to majority rule. He once declared that “*Rhodesia is a country of blacks and whites, and that it will be governed by blacks and whites. But I don’t believe in majority rule, black majority rule, ever in Rhodesia, not in a thousand years*” (Meredith, 2015, p. 323). Such statements reflected the ideological foundation of a political system in which governance was defended through military strength, repression, and the continuous detention of nationalist leaders such as Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe.

The intensification of both internal resistance and international pressure eventually led to the release of these nationalist leaders. While Nkomo initially pursued negotiations with the Smith regime, Mugabe adopted a more militant position that supported continued armed struggle. By 1976,

negotiations between Nkomo and Smith had broken down, and the liberation movements increasingly relied on guerrilla warfare to challenge the minority regime. Smith attempted to counter this pressure by promoting a moderate nationalist leader, Abel Muzorewa, who emerged victorious in the April 1979 election. However, both Mugabe and Nkomo rejected the legitimacy of the election, arguing that it failed to dismantle the structures of minority domination.

The failure of this arrangement prolonged political instability and armed struggle until a more comprehensive settlement was reached. In 1980, a general election was conducted that resulted in the victory of Mugabe’s Patriotic Front. Although independence marked the end of formal colonial rule, the political culture shaped by decades of militarised governance continued to influence the structures of power within the new state. It is within this historical trajectory—from colonial concessionary rule to minority settler governance and finally to liberation politics—that the Smithan Syndrome can be located: a pattern in which military authority and political power became deeply intertwined, shaping Zimbabwe’s democratic institutions and electoral processes long after the end of colonial rule.

## Conceptual Clarification

### *Soldiered*

The concept *soldiered* is derived from the word *soldier*, which refers to a person engaged in military service, particularly within the armed forces. One of the defining attributes of soldiers is the use of coercion and

organised force in enforcing obedience and maintaining order. Within the context of this study, the term *soldiered* is used to describe a political environment in which military actors, military culture, and coercive institutions play decisive roles in shaping political processes and outcomes.

In Zimbabwe, especially within the period under study, elections and governance processes have often reflected strong military influence. The presence of soldiers in political activities, particularly elections, has frequently gone beyond conventional security duties to include intimidation, coercion, and the manipulation of voters. For instance, during the 2018 elections, soldiers were reportedly deployed across several communities where their presence created an atmosphere of fear among the electorate. Militia groups linked to political actors also participated in acts of intimidation that influenced voting behaviour. Such developments illustrate how democratic processes can become militarised when coercive institutions are deployed to influence political participation.

From the perspective of civil–military relations theory, a democratic system ideally requires the subordination of the military to civilian political authority. However, where the military becomes deeply embedded in political competition, democratic institutions may become distorted. In such contexts, elections still occur, but they are conducted within an environment shaped by coercion and intimidation rather than free political competition.

This condition is what this study refers to as *soldiered democracy*, a system in which democratic institutions formally exist but are heavily influenced or constrained by the presence and actions of military actors.

Closely related to this phenomenon is what this study describes as the *Smithan Syndrome*. The Smithan Syndrome refers to a historically rooted pattern in Zimbabwean politics in which political authority relies heavily on coercive power inherited from the colonial regime of Ian Smith and reinforced during the liberation struggle. The syndrome manifests in the persistent use of military structures, liberation war rhetoric, and coercive political practices to maintain political dominance. Although Zimbabwe formally adopted democratic institutions after independence, the legacy of militarised governance has continued to shape political competition and administrative practices.

### ***Peace***

The concept of peace is fluid in nature and does not possess a universally accepted definition. Scholars and practitioners from different disciplines have offered varying interpretations depending on their analytical perspectives. Despite these differences, a common denominator in most definitions is that peace refers to a condition that allows for harmonious human coexistence and societal development through the reduction or elimination of conflict.

In its simplest form, peace may refer to a condition characterised by minimal fear, violence, intimidation, or social disruption. However, scholars have also

distinguished between different forms of peace depending on the depth of social stability present within a society. These perspectives can broadly be classified into philosophical and sociological interpretations.

From a philosophical standpoint, peace is often associated with the natural state of human existence. Some philosophers argue that human beings originally existed in a state of harmony before the emergence of social inequalities and competing interests. Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that early human beings lived in a relatively peaceful state of nature characterised by simplicity and compassion, but the development of private property and social comparison generated inequality, competition, and conflict (Rousseau, 1755/1994). Similarly, Augustine of Hippo, in *The City of God*, conceptualised human society as divided between two symbolic communities—the City of God, representing divine peace and spiritual order, and the City of Man, characterised by pride, worldly ambition, and conflict (Augustine, 1998).

From a sociological perspective, peace refers to a condition of social harmony in which structural conditions allow individuals and groups to meet their basic needs without oppression or discrimination. In this sense, peace involves not only the absence of direct violence but also the presence of justice, equality, and respect for human rights. Reardon et al., as cited in Aderibigbe, define peace as a dynamic social process in which justice, equity, and respect for basic human rights are maximised while violence, both

physical and structural, is minimised (Aderibigbe, n.d.).

This definition is particularly relevant to the Zimbabwean situation because it emphasises justice and equity as fundamental conditions for peace. Where injustice prevails—manifested through discrimination, exploitation, poverty, and political repression—peace becomes fragile or illusory. In such contexts, the absence of large-scale war does not necessarily indicate the presence of genuine peace.

A closer examination of Zimbabwe reveals that the country has not experienced prolonged interstate war since independence, unlike several other African states. However, this does not necessarily imply the existence of positive peace. Rather, the country largely exhibits negative peace, which refers to the absence of open warfare but not the absence of structural or political violence. Negative peace exists where direct armed conflict may be absent but societal tensions, political repression, and structural inequalities continue to undermine stability and development. Within the period covered in this study, Zimbabwe's political environment reflects this form of peace, where electoral intimidation, political repression, and governance crises have persisted despite the absence of full-scale armed conflict.

### ***Democracy***

One of the most widely cited definitions of democracy is attributed to Abraham Lincoln, who described it as government of the people, by the people, and for the people. While this definition captures the normative ideal of democracy, scholars have noted that

democratic systems vary widely in practice across different societies.

In general terms, democracy refers to a system of governance in which political authority is derived from the people through participation, representation, and accountability. Duruji (2010) notes that a common feature in most interpretations of democracy is the idea that people should have the capacity to influence decisions affecting their lives and resources. In democratic systems, citizens are expected to possess the freedom to express political opinions, organise politically, and use peaceful means to criticise or replace their leaders.

However, Zimbabwe's historical experience with democracy has been complex and contested. During the era of white minority rule, democratic practices were limited primarily to the settler population. Although elections were held regularly according to constitutional provisions, these elections effectively functioned as minority elections because the conditions for participation excluded most Africans. Franchise qualifications relating to property, income, and education significantly limited African participation in electoral politics.

Furthermore, while political participation among the white population was encouraged as a marker of citizenship, African political mobilisation was often suppressed through restrictive laws and security measures. As a result, Zimbabwe developed a long tradition of authoritarian governance structures, first under colonial minority rule and later under post-independence political dominance.

Even after independence, the country has struggled to fully consolidate democratic governance. Although elections are held periodically, they have frequently been criticised for irregularities, allegations of manipulation, and declining voter participation. For instance, Chikwanha-Dzenga et al. (2004) note that voter turnout reportedly declined from approximately 94 per cent in the 1980 elections to significantly lower levels in subsequent elections, reflecting growing voter apathy and distrust in the electoral process. These patterns demonstrate the difficulties of sustaining democratic legitimacy within a political environment shaped by historical authoritarian structures.

## **Politics**

Politics has been defined in numerous ways by scholars across different disciplines. In general terms, politics concerns the processes through which power is acquired, exercised, and distributed within a society. Politics has been conceptualised as fundamentally concerned with power relations and the ways individuals or groups organise themselves to pursue divergent and often conflicting interests. In this regard, Eghosa E. Osaghae defined politics as the arena in which such competing interests are articulated and negotiated (as cited in Madukwe, 2005). Elaborating on this perspective, Madukwe argues that the form of politics introduced during colonial rule in Nigeria served primarily as an instrument through which the British pursued their own divergent and often conflicting policies within the colony (Madukwe, 2005).

Similarly, Lasswell (1958) famously defined politics as the process that

determines “who gets what, when, and how.” This definition emphasises the central role of power and resource allocation in political competition. Politics therefore involves the struggle among individuals and groups for control over state institutions and access to national resources.

Within the African context, politics is often closely associated with state power because control of the state provides access to economic opportunities, influence, and security. Igwe (2002) therefore describes politics as the process involving the emergence, consolidation, and use of political power. In this sense, political competition often becomes intense because control of state power carries significant social and economic benefits.

The situation in Zimbabwe reflects this dynamic. The struggle for political power has historically been shaped by both colonial structures and the legacy of the liberation struggle. During the final phases of nationalist mobilisation, major liberation movements such as ZAPU and ZANU developed strong military wings that played crucial roles in the armed struggle against minority rule. The experience of guerrilla warfare subsequently influenced political culture by introducing a militaristic conception of political competition.

Scholars have observed that the legacy of the liberation struggle produced a political culture characterised by strong loyalty to liberation movements, intolerance of political opposition, and the normalisation of coercive strategies in political competition. The political experience acquired during the armed

struggle thus continued to influence post-independence governance structures, contributing to authoritarian tendencies and the persistence of militarised political practices within Zimbabwe’s democratic institutions.

### **From Smith to Mnangagwa: The Path to Soldiered Democracy**

The evolution of Zimbabwe’s political system from the era of Ian Smith to the contemporary administration of Emmerson Mnangagwa illustrates the gradual consolidation of what this study describes as soldiered democracy. The phenomenon reflects a political order in which democratic institutions formally exist but operate within a framework shaped by coercive authority, militarised political culture, and centralised executive power. The roots of this system can be traced to the colonial regime of Ian Smith and its subsequent transformation under post-independence governments.

### **Constitutional Engineering and the Foundations of Centralised Power**

The Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) on 11 November 1965 marked a decisive turning point in Zimbabwe’s political history. With the declaration, Ian Douglas Smith assumed full control as Head of Government and began constructing administrative mechanisms designed to preserve white minority rule. Central to this strategy was constitutional engineering aimed at preventing majority rule.

The 1969 constitution introduced by Smith was intended to entrench political authority permanently within the hands of the white minority. As Smith himself declared, the

constitutional framework would serve as the “death knell of the notion of majority rule” and ensure that governance remained under the control of “civilised Rhodesians” (Meredith, 2015, p. 320). In practical terms, this meant designing electoral and institutional arrangements that preserved the appearance of democratic governance while effectively excluding the African majority from meaningful political participation.

Although Africans were not explicitly disenfranchised by law, the franchise qualifications—such as property ownership, income thresholds, and educational requirements—ensured that only a very small segment of the African population could vote. Even among those who technically qualified, participation remained extremely limited. Consequently, democracy during the Smith era functioned largely as a procedural mechanism legitimising minority domination rather than a genuine system of popular representation.

This institutional arrangement established an early pattern in which constitutional frameworks were deliberately used to consolidate political power. Such practices later influenced post-independence governance structures, demonstrating the continuity that forms part of the Smithan Syndrome.

### **Criminalisation of Opposition Politics**

Another defining feature of Zimbabwe’s political evolution has been the systematic suppression of political opposition. During the colonial period, white participation in politics was celebrated as a marker of citizenship, whereas African political

activism was treated as a security threat. A range of restrictive laws criminalised nationalist political activities, leading to the detention of prominent nationalist leaders such as Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe.

The transition to majority rule did not fundamentally eliminate this political culture of repression. Following the independence elections of 1980, Robert Mugabe assumed office as Prime Minister and initially presented his administration as one committed to national reconciliation and democratic governance. However, over time, opposition movements increasingly came to be perceived as threats to state authority rather than legitimate participants in political competition.

The relationship between the ruling ZANU-PF party and the opposition Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) illustrates this dynamic. Tensions between the two parties culminated in the political crisis of the early 1980s, during which the government accused Joshua Nkomo of plotting to overthrow the state. Mugabe publicly portrayed ZAPU as a dangerous political force that needed to be neutralised, famously describing the party as a “cobra in a house” whose head had to be destroyed (Nkomo, 1984, p. 2).

The repression of ZAPU supporters during the period between 1983 and 1987 eventually compelled the party to enter into the Unity Accord with ZANU-PF, effectively dissolving itself as an independent political force. The episode demonstrated how opposition politics could be neutralised through a combination of coercion, intimidation, and political pressure.

This approach continued in later years with the treatment of emerging opposition parties such as the Zimbabwe Unity Movement (ZUM) in 1989. ZUM, led by Edgar Tekere, attempted to challenge the ruling party's growing dominance but soon encountered state hostility and repression. Incidents of political violence, including attacks on opposition figures, contributed to the weakening of the movement (Richard, 2000, p. 41).

These developments illustrate how the suppression of opposition politics became a recurring feature of Zimbabwe's political system, reinforcing the broader pattern of soldiered democracy.

### **The Imperial Presidency and Executive Centralisation**

A major transformation in Zimbabwe's political system occurred with the consolidation of executive authority under Robert Mugabe. Initially serving as Prime Minister after independence in 1980, Mugabe later restructured the constitutional framework to concentrate power within the presidency.

Through constitutional reforms in the late 1980s, the office of Prime Minister was abolished and replaced with an executive presidency. This transformation significantly expanded the powers of the head of state, granting extensive authority over legislative processes, administrative appointments, and national policy direction (Moyo, 1992, pp. 43–45; Makumbe & Compagnon, 2000, pp. 15–35).

In addition, the Presidential Powers Act enabled the president to enact regulations with the force of law without full parliamentary approval in certain circumstances. These legal changes effectively created what some scholars have described as an “imperial presidency,” characterised by the concentration of political authority within a single executive office.

The creation of this highly centralised executive structure further entrenched the conditions for soldiered democracy. With political authority concentrated in the presidency and supported by strong security institutions, democratic accountability mechanisms became significantly weakened.

### **Militarisation of Electoral Politics**

Elections have remained a central component of Zimbabwe's political system since independence. However, the conduct of these elections has often reflected patterns of intimidation, coercion, and political manipulation.

Even the landmark 1980 elections that ushered Zimbabwe into independence were marked by widespread reports of intimidation and political violence. Observers noted that political parties engaged in aggressive campaigning tactics, while supporters of rival movements frequently faced harassment and threats (Masunungure, n.d.).

These patterns continued in subsequent elections. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, opposition parties and civil society organisations increasingly accused the ruling party of using state institutions and security structures to influence electoral outcomes. The 2002 presidential election, for example, was

widely criticised for irregularities and political intimidation.

During the election period, Mugabe himself publicly dismissed the possibility of a second electoral round, confidently asserting that his opponents would be defeated outright (Masunungure, n.d.). Statements of this nature reinforced perceptions that electoral competition operated within a political environment heavily tilted in favour of the ruling party.

The militarisation of elections intensified further during later electoral cycles, particularly during periods of heightened political competition. The presence of military actors and militia groups within electoral processes contributed to an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty among voters, undermining the credibility of democratic institutions.

### **Continuity and Change under Mnangagwa**

The resignation of Robert Mugabe in November 2017 marked a dramatic turning point in Zimbabwe's political history. Following Mugabe's removal from office, Emmerson Mnangagwa assumed the presidency and promised a new era of democratic reform and political openness.

However, the 2018 elections raised questions about the extent to which Zimbabwe had moved beyond its longstanding patterns of militarised politics. Reports indicated that security forces continued to play visible roles in managing political dissent and maintaining order during the electoral period (Masunungure, n.d.).

These developments suggest that while leadership may have changed, many structural features of Zimbabwe's political system remain deeply influenced by historical legacies. The persistence of strong executive authority, the continued prominence of security institutions, and the recurring tensions surrounding electoral competition indicate that elements of the Smithan Syndrome continue to shape the country's political trajectory.

In this sense, Zimbabwe's political evolution from Smith to Mnangagwa demonstrates both continuity and adaptation. While the ideological justification for political authority has shifted from white minority rule to liberation legitimacy, the underlying reliance on centralised power and coercive political practices has remained a consistent feature of governance. This continuity provides a crucial context for understanding the emergence and persistence of soldiered democracy in Zimbabwe.

### **The Dynamics of Soldiered Democracy**

One of the most striking manifestations of soldiered democracy in Zimbabwe occurred during the 2008 presidential elections, particularly the run-off contest between the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) and the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC). The first round of the election produced results that significantly challenged the dominance of the incumbent government. The MDC secured 1,195,562 votes, representing approximately 47.9 per cent of the total votes cast, while the incumbent ZANU-PF candidate, Robert Mugabe, obtained 1,079,730 votes, representing about 43.2 per cent (Masunungure, n.d.).

Despite the opposition's electoral advantage, the results did not immediately translate into a transfer of power. Instead, the government declared that a run-off election would be held several weeks later. The period leading to the run-off election witnessed an escalation of political violence and intimidation that fundamentally altered the electoral environment. Reports from various observers described the political atmosphere during this period as one characterised by widespread intimidation, coercion, and organised violence directed primarily at opposition supporters.

The ruling party increasingly framed the electoral contest as an existential struggle for political survival. In this context, the election was portrayed not simply as a democratic competition but as a confrontation between political forces defending the liberation legacy and those allegedly seeking to undermine it. Scholars have observed that the ruling party frequently invoked liberation war narratives to justify the continued dominance of ZANU-PF within Zimbabwe's political system (Masunungure, n.d., citing *The Herald*, 31 May 2008; *The Independent*, 9 June 2008). The ideological foundation of this approach can be traced to the militaristic conception of political authority that emerged during the liberation struggle.

Robert Mugabe himself once articulated this relationship between armed struggle and political legitimacy by asserting that electoral authority must be secured by the force that made liberation possible. In this political philosophy, the ballot was viewed as a product of the gun, and the armed

forces were therefore regarded as the guarantors of political authority. During the 2008 run-off campaign, the involvement of the military in political mobilisation became particularly visible. Senior military officials publicly expressed their support for the ruling party and emphasised the role of the armed forces in protecting the political legacy of the liberation struggle. For example, the Army Chief of Staff, Major-General Martin Chedondo, addressed soldiers and emphasised that members of the armed forces had a duty to defend the political achievements of the liberation movement and support the leadership associated with that legacy (Masunungure, n.d., citing *The Herald*, 31 May 2008; *The Independent*, 9 June 2008).

Statements of this nature suggested that the military did not view itself as politically neutral but rather as an institution committed to safeguarding a particular political order. Within the framework of soldiered democracy, such attitudes blur the boundary between the military and the civilian political sphere. Instead of functioning strictly as a professional institution subordinate to civilian authority, the military becomes an active participant in political competition.

The practical consequences of this militarisation became evident in the widespread reports of intimidation and coercion during the run-off campaign. Military personnel, war veterans, and ruling party militias reportedly conducted campaigns in rural communities aimed at discouraging support for the opposition. Threats of violence and references to past conflicts were frequently used to create an

atmosphere of fear among voters (Zimbabwe Democracy Institute, 2018).

The outcome of the run-off election ultimately reflected this highly coercive environment. Facing intense violence against its supporters, the MDC withdrew from the run-off contest, effectively leaving Mugabe as the sole candidate. The election thus became less a competitive democratic process and more a confirmation of existing power structures.

The persistence of soldiered democracy did not end with the departure of Robert Mugabe from power. Mugabe's resignation in November 2017, following military intervention and internal party struggles, brought Emmerson Mnangagwa to the presidency. Although the new administration promised political reform and democratic renewal, evidence suggests that the structural features of militarised politics remained influential in the country's electoral processes.

This continuity became particularly visible during the 2018 general elections. A survey conducted by the Zimbabwe Democracy Institute following the 30 July election revealed significant public perceptions regarding the role of the military in the electoral process. According to the survey findings, approximately 81 per cent of respondents reported the presence of soldiers within rural communities during the election period (Zimbabwe Democracy Institute, 2018).

Many respondents interpreted this presence as politically motivated. About 38 per cent of those surveyed believed that soldiers were actively

campaigning for President Emmerson Mnangagwa and the ruling ZANU-PF party. Another 34 per cent reported that the soldiers were officially deployed for agricultural activities under the government's Command Agriculture programme but suspected that the programme served as a cover for political mobilisation in support of the ruling party (Zimbabwe Democracy Institute, 2018).

The presence of military personnel within communities had notable psychological and political effects on voters. Approximately 46 per cent of respondents indicated that opposition political parties felt intimidated by the militarised environment, while 45 per cent reported that civil society organisations also felt deterred from engaging fully in political activities (Zimbabwe Democracy Institute, 2018).

These perceptions also influenced voter behaviour. About 57 per cent of respondents reported feeling insecure about voting for opposition parties due to fears of intimidation by political authorities. Although 76 per cent indicated that they would still participate in the election, many acknowledged that their participation would not necessarily reflect genuine political choice but rather a response to pressure or fear (Zimbabwe Democracy Institute, 2018).

The survey also revealed widespread doubts about the credibility of the electoral process itself. Nearly half of the respondents believed that the election results would not accurately reflect the free choices of the electorate because of the military presence within

local communities (Zimbabwe Democracy Institute, 2018).

Taken together, these findings highlight the continuing relevance of soldiered democracy within Zimbabwe's contemporary political system. Although formal democratic institutions such as elections, political parties, and constitutional frameworks remain in place, the influence of military structures and liberation war narratives continues to shape political behaviour and electoral outcomes.

In this sense, the dynamics of Zimbabwean politics demonstrate the enduring influence of the Smithan Syndrome, whereby the fusion of political authority and coercive power—originating in the colonial era and reinforced during the liberation struggle—continues to shape democratic processes. The persistence of this political culture suggests that meaningful democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe remains constrained by historical patterns of militarised governance.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The pursuit of liberal democracy in many African states has frequently been accompanied by complex political tensions and institutional challenges. In several instances, the formal adoption of democratic institutions has not necessarily resulted in genuine democratic governance. Instead, electoral processes have often been embedded within political systems shaped by authoritarian legacies, elite power struggles, and the strategic deployment of coercive institutions. Zimbabwe represents a significant example of this broader continental challenge.

This study examined the historical evolution of Zimbabwe's democratic

experience from the era of Ian Smith to the administration of Emmerson Mnangagwa, with particular emphasis on the emergence of what has been described in this paper as soldiered democracy. The analysis demonstrated that Zimbabwe's political system has been profoundly shaped by the persistent interaction between political authority and coercive institutions. Beginning with the colonial regime of Ian Smith, constitutional engineering and security institutions were used to entrench minority rule and suppress political opposition. These structures created a governance model in which democratic institutions formally existed but were constrained by the strategic deployment of force and administrative control.

The study further showed that this pattern did not disappear with the attainment of independence in 1980. Instead, many of the institutional and political practices established during the colonial era were reproduced within the post-colonial state. Under Robert Mugabe, the political system increasingly evolved towards centralised executive authority, suppression of opposition movements, and the continued use of military and security structures in electoral politics. The transformation of the prime ministerial system into an executive presidency and the expansion of presidential powers reinforced the concentration of political authority and weakened democratic accountability.

These developments collectively illustrate what this study conceptualises as the Smithan Syndrome—a historically rooted political condition in which coercive institutions and liberation war legacies are continually invoked to legitimise political authority and influence electoral processes. The persistence of this syndrome was evident not only during Mugabe's long tenure but also in the political dynamics surrounding the 2018 elections under Emmerson Mnangagwa. Survey data from the Zimbabwe Democracy Institute indicated widespread public perceptions of

military presence and intimidation during the electoral period, demonstrating the continuing relevance of soldiered democracy within Zimbabwe's political landscape.

Beyond the Zimbabwean case, the findings of this study contribute to broader discussions within African political studies and civil–military relations scholarship. The Zimbabwean experience illustrates how historical legacies of militarised governance can shape democratic institutions long after the formal transition from colonial rule. It also highlights the difficulties of achieving democratic consolidation in contexts where political elites rely heavily on security institutions to maintain authority. In such environments, elections may continue to occur regularly, but their credibility and legitimacy remain constrained by the persistent influence of coercive power.

Despite the insights generated by this study, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The analysis relied primarily on historical and documentary sources, including secondary literature and survey data, which may not fully capture the range of perspectives within Zimbabwe's political society. In addition, the scope of the study focused primarily on national-level political dynamics and did not extensively examine local-level variations in political behaviour or civil–military relations across different regions of the country.

Future research could therefore expand this line of inquiry by incorporating field-based investigations, including interviews with political actors, civil society organisations, and members of the security sector. Comparative studies examining similar patterns of militarised politics in other African states could also provide deeper insights into the broader regional implications of soldiered democracy. Such studies would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how democratic institutions interact with

historical legacies of militarisation across the continent.

In light of these findings, several policy recommendations emerge. First, meaningful democratic consolidation in Zimbabwe requires a fundamental transformation of civil–military relations. The military must operate within a clearly defined professional framework that emphasises political neutrality and subordination to civilian authority. Second, civic and democratic education should be strengthened among both civilian populations and members of the security sector in order to reinforce democratic norms and respect for electoral processes. Third, political parties, civil society organisations, and the media must continue to advocate institutional reforms that promote electoral transparency, accountability, and the protection of political rights.

Ultimately, the experience of Zimbabwe demonstrates that the formal existence of democratic institutions is insufficient for genuine democratic governance. Where political authority continues to be sustained through coercive structures and militarised political culture, democratic processes remain vulnerable to manipulation. Overcoming the legacy of soldiered democracy will therefore require sustained institutional reform, strengthened democratic norms, and the gradual dismantling of the political culture in which the fear of military coercion continues to shape political participation and electoral behaviour in Zimbabwe.

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